



Centre for  
**Society and  
Mental Health**

# 6 PRIORITIES TO ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE POST-PANDEMIC

The REACH team



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



**REACH**

Risk, Resilience, Ethnicity, and AdolesCent Mental Health

The Covid-19 pandemic and measures to control its spread have exacerbated inequalities and disproportionately impacted young people, particularly those in disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable groups. During the pandemic, we have followed a large group of young people, as part of our ongoing cohort study, REACH, to assess impacts on the mental health of young people from diverse backgrounds.

Based on findings from this research, a policy lab, and extensive consultations with young people, here we set out 6 priorities – co-produced with young people – for social policy and community initiatives to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic in the most affected groups and to enable young people to thrive post-pandemic.

## **Preface**

Awareness of mental health has increased enormously in recent years. The key messages are that mental health problems are common (1 in 4 adults; 1 in 10 children and adolescents) and that all of us are susceptible, messages that are buttressed by testimonials from high profile public figures in sport, music, arts, and media. However, this narrative obscures – and thereby diverts attention from – perhaps the most salient fact about mental health problems, that is: mental health problems disproportionately affect – by wide margins – the most disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable in society. The major social determinants of mental health problems are linked to low income, poor housing, food insecurity, interpersonal conflict, racism, and experiences of violence and trauma.

All these social determinants have been exacerbated by Covid-19, and their impacts are particularly pronounced during adolescence. Given this, there is understandable and widespread concern about the long-term impacts of the pandemic on young people, especially those in disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable groups. In addition, for young people in minoritised groups, experiences of racism and discrimination have been magnified during the Covid-19 pandemic. Disproportionate use of stop and search during lockdown, the unlawful deaths of black people (e.g., George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and more), and the related Black Lives Matter (#BLM) protests have been significant parts of the pandemic experience for many young people from minoritised groups.

Findings from our – and other – research reinforce concerns about the impacts of the pandemic and these wider social changes on young people. The evidence increasingly points to worrying trends in mental health, with young people in low-income households and in marginalised and vulnerable groups most affected. To mitigate these short-term impacts, prevent long-term consequences, and enable young people to thrive, we need principles (e.g., equity, justice, community) and goals (e.g., reducing inequalities, increasing security in employment, income, and housing, providing robust social and health services for those most in need) that can guide social policies and community initiatives in a post-pandemic world. This means changing the narrative, addressing the root causes, providing support – in non-stigmatising ways – to those most affected, and ensuring access to appropriate services for those most in need. Together with young people, here we propose 6 priorities and several related achievable policies and practices that – if actioned – can support young people to thrive in the post-pandemic world.

## **#1 Change the narrative**

To draw attention to and ensure debate on appropriate responses that are grounded in recognition of the fundamental social determinants of mental health, we need to transform the narrative on mental health. That is, we need the media, policymakers, commissioners, funders, Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise organisations, and researchers to:

- Rewrite core messages on mental health to put front and centre the fundamental fact: Mental health problems disproportionately affect – by wide margins – the most disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable in society as a consequence of their disproportionate exposure to inequities across the social determinants of health.

## **#2 Improve support and security for families on low incomes**

Financial insecurity and poverty - in all its manifestations - directly affect mental health. These impacts have been compounded by Covid-19. To mitigate these impacts, we need government to prioritise improving security and support for families on low incomes and, in this, we echo and support the recommendations of the Covid-19 Realities Report, including:

- Reinstate and make permanent the £20 uplift for Universal Credit.
- Increase Child Benefit by £10 and make it universal.
- End the two-child limit and benefit cap.

In addition, more sustainable solutions need to be explored. In particular, we need to institute:

- A national debate - across government, the media, and wider public - on the feasibility of implementing a guaranteed income scheme.

## **#3 End the digital divide**

The consequences of the digital divide for young people in low-income households was starkly exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Lack of access to computers, the internet, and quiet spaces for study as a consequence of inadequate housing exacerbated educational inequalities and created additional strains on the mental health of young people. To address this, we need national and local government to invest in:

- Universal access to free high-speed broadband.
- Funding for schools to ensure access to a laptop computer for all young people in low-income households.

## **#4 Increased - and ring-fenced - funding for schools with a high proportion of pupils in low-income families**

Schools with a high proportion of young people in low-income households will have a higher proportion of young people with mental health problems. If schools are to provide effective support - directly or indirectly by buying in services - for the mental health of pupils, additional government funding is urgently needed. This could be targeted at schools with the greatest need by:

- An increase in the pupil premium (e.g., 2.5%, equivalent to ~ £60m), with the additional resource ring-fenced to support, in partnership with young people and carers, culturally appropriate (a) whole-school approaches to promote mental health, (b) mental health resources for those who have experienced trauma or loss, (c) in-school services for those with mental health problems

## **#5 Provide more inclusive, safe, and free spaces for young people**

Disinvestment in local services, resources, and leisure facilities has severely restricted safe community spaces available to young people - to socialise, to pursue interests, to engage in sports; that is, to engage in activities that support and sustain good mental health. This is particularly prominent in areas with high levels of deprivation. To address this, we recommend increased funding for local government to:

- Invest in local, young people friendly, community-led services (e.g., libraries).
- Introduce schemes, in partnership with local businesses, to support coffee shops to offer free spaces to young people. (Government schemes can be put in place to offset the space sacrificed for paying customers.)
- Implement an 'oyster' card system for young people to tap into leisure facilities and other spaces, with a weekly credit for young people in low-income families.

## **#6 Improve community relationships and young people's trust in authority**

Representatives of institutions and authority (e.g., police) are often a source of discrimination and coercion for young people in minoritised groups and this impacts their mental health (e.g., impacts of stop and search on mental health) - an issue heightened during the pandemic. To address this and begin or continue the process of increasing trust and improving relations between local communities and sources of authority, we need local and police authorities to commit to:

- Integrating the voices and perspectives of young people with experiences of stop and search into police training, as part of wider training on structural racism.
- Initiating ongoing programmes of community round tables (requesting police officers don't attend in uniform), with activities to encourage young people to attend.
- Implementing transparent mechanisms of accountability that instil confidence among young people and the wider community that malpractice or inappropriate actions taken by the police or authorities will be addressed and the learning from these incidents embedded in practice.

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